COVER SHEET

The Audience as Aurator Again? Sound and Rolf de Heer's *Ten Canoes*.

By insisting *Ten Canoes* (2006) have all its diegetic dialogue in the Aboriginal dialect of Ganalbingu, writer and co-director Rolf de Heer has made a subtle statement about indigenous pride and the situation of contemporary Aborigines in Australia.

In *Ten Canoes* (co-directed by Peler Djigirr) the 'magpie goose people' of Arnhem Land are portrayed as empowered and in control of their language, their culture and their lives, rather than conforming to the usual media presentation of Aboriginals as victims of colonial aggression, disrespect and maltreatment. When discussing the seemingly perennial Aboriginal problems of substance abuse, domestic violence, unemployment and reduced life expectancy, the descriptor 'disadvantaged' is a term that immediately springs to mind, but de Hear reminds us that it should not be used as an automatic synonym for indigenes. Identifying and addressing the causes of the woe that blights the lives of many contemporary Aborigines remains important; nevertheless, one must not assume they have always been that way - or will always be so. An era of idyllic wellbeing preceded the white settlement of Australia, and, in black and white, de Heer takes us back to that time a thousand years ago - and to an even earlier, more rapturous Dreamtime, which cameraman Ian Jones has lensed in vibrant colour.

Ten Canoes is the story of Dayindi. played by 17-yeor old Jamie Gulpilil. son of David Gulpilil, who also starred in de Heer's *The Tracker* (2001), and who provides the colloquially cheerful English narration in this film. Dayindi covets one of the wives of his older brother. To teach him the right way to do things, the crafty older brother (Peter Minygululu) tells his potential rival an instructive ancestral story, a tragi-comic fable from the mythical past. It is a cautionary tale of doomed love, kidnapping, sorcery, bungling mayhem and ill-directed revenge.

The starting point for the film was an old black-and-white photograph of canoe-making taken by anthropologist Donald Thomson in the 1930s, an artefact that has become part of the history of the Yolngu people of Ramingining. The film was shot on their land, in and around the Arafura Swamp in north-eastern Arnhem Land in May and June 2005, amidst man-eating crocodiles, mosquitoes and leeches. With a relatively low budget of $2.2 million, it was funded by a syndicate consisting of the Australian Film Finance Corporation, the South Australian Film Corporation, SBS-Independent, Fandango Italy and the Adelaide Film Festival. The world premiere of *Ten Canoes* took place at the Adelaide Festival on March 19 and the film will be released nationally on June 29 through Palace Films. In May this year it screened at the Cannes film festival, where it was awarded the Special Jury Prize.
Referring to the sound design and production in de Heer's cult hit *Bad Boy Bubby* (Rolf de Heer, 1993), Anna Hickey-Moody and Melissa Iocca coined a new term for this cinemagoer when they wrote: "In de Heer's film, the viewer is primarily a listener, or aurator, and secondly a spectator."[1] Hickey-Moody and Iocca argue that in privileging the intimate noises of Bubby's existence through the use of binaural microphones, and producing an intensely claustrophobic atmosphere of "gurgling, eating and pissing", the audience is forced alternately to identify with him and be disgusted by him. With the listener positioned between the two microphones, i.e. virtually between Bubby's ears, he is perfectly synchronized with the protagonist's

journey; the aurator hears through his left ear that which Bubby hears through his left ear. Michel Chion's hierarchy of aural importance[2]; the conventional sound model with dialogue occupying the highest, most important position, is dismantled and reversed by the binaural microphones. Diegetic sounds not normally incorporated into the audience's experience of the universe of the film become foregrounded: they are unnervingly persistent and strident. In the low stimulation environment of Bubby's mother's squalid apartment, the soundtrack of Bubby's life is afforded intimate prominence. The amplified and evocative sound environment produced in *Bad Boy Bubby* recalls the experimental soundscapes of the films of Philip Brophy, which have been chronicled as "the organization of more complex spatio-temporal relationships ... [that explore] ... methods which have the potential to extend and enrich the vocabulary of film sound and perception".[3] Indeed, understanding the significance of de Heer's use of sound requires academic attention at least equivalent to that which Anahid Kassabian argues is given to the subject of 'reading' in literary studies and 'spectatorship' in film studies.[4] With a conventional soundtrack. *Bad Boy Bubby* would have an entirely different effect on its audience.

In some respects, de Hear has continued his preoccupation with satisfying the aurator in the audience with *Ten Canoes.* Sound recordist James Currie and composer Tom Heuzenroeder sought the "best way to capture the sonic authenticity of the Arnhem Land wetlands".[5] With what journalist Sam Oster describes as a proscenium arch look, i.e. mostly wide shots, there was nowhere to place boom microphones, and because the actors were virtually naked, lapel microphones were not an option. Unscripted takes and a desire not to interrupt the action with battery changes and conventionally interruptive systems were also important. Oster reports that;

> De Heer approached Adelaide University to produce a custom device for dialogue recording, and was put in touch with Dr Matthew Sorell, the research director of the Convergent Communications Research Group at the university.... [Dr Sorell said] 'We settled on the MSI Megastick 256, which can run for about eight hours on a single AAA alkaline battery. It has enough memory (256MB) for nine hours of recording at 16kHz sampling using 4-bit ADPCM (Adaptive Differential Pulse Code Modulation), which is perfectly adequate for voice, and can also record at 48kHz if needed. They only cost about $250 each, so we could afford to put one on each actor and have some spares.'... An input system was designed using multiple USB hubs, a laptop, Adobe Audition software, and fail-proof power systems and hard-drive backups. The engineering team set up templates and macros within the software to further streamline the post-recording track management and mix-down.[6]

The recording devices were hidden in the actors' hair or hung from their necks in traditional pouches and synchronized to a horn sounded on the set each morning. The use of these 'hair' microphones resulted in about 100 hours of sound recording per shoot day, with Currie having to process about three gigabytes of information each evening. The outcome being that, as Currie, describes, "all these fragmented bits and pieces that we'd shot over the seven weeks had come together to form a shape that I'd never seen before".[7] With its incidental music of traditional Aboriginal instruments and the "alien sounds of chirrups, croaks and slithers",[8] *Ten Canoes* has a soundscape quite unlike anything audiences will have heard before.

De Heer explains to *TIME Pacific* journalist Michael Fitzgerald: “People talk about, what is a white director doing making an indigenous story? But I'm not, ... They’re telling the story, largely, and I’m the mechanism by which they can.”[9] Indeed, the fundamental goal of most of de Heer’s films can be seen as providing an amplified voice for the unheard, the marginalized, the Other. As Adrian Martin has pointed out, de Heer tends to identify with “the figure of the naive visionary”[10], someone who is isolated from mainstream society, and in this regard he is not unlike Lars von Trier and the Dogme cohort. Part of the isolation de Heer’s protagonists endure stems from their struggle to master spoken language. In *Bad Boy Bubby* the socially inept male protagonist mimics the phrases and gestures of those he meets as he stumbles from situation to situation, until, by repetition and sheer good luck, he achieves the zenith of societal struggle: a happy suburban family. As a protest against her warring mother and father, the little girl in *The Quiet Room* (1996) becomes mute. The disabled female protagonist in *Dance Me To My Song* (1997) can only express herself through a computerized voice-box. In *Alexandra’s Project* (2003) the alienated wife finds a voice via her video recorder and asserts herself to her emotionally isolating husband. In 2004 music scholar Cat Hope commented: “each of de Heer’s films merits a detailed treatise on the way they feature innovative sound ideas in the scripting and production stages, resulting in some of the most challenging and exciting cinema made in Australia today”.[11] The same can be said of *Ten Canoes.* What’s more, in enabling the 800 Yolngu inhabitants of Ramingining to tell their own story in their language of Ganulbingu, de Heer has empowered them to the extent that the social malaise of contemporary Indigenous Australians seems an aberration, not the norm.

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Endnotes.

[1]Anna C. Hickey-Moody and Melissa Iocca, “Sonic affect(s). Binaural technologies and the construction of auratorship in Rolf de Heer’s *Bad Boy Bubby”, Metro,* issue 140, 2004, p. 78.

[2] Michel Chion, *The voice in cinema,* trans C. Gorbman, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999, p. 5.

[3] P. Samartzs, Avant-garde meets mainstream: The Film Scores of Philip Brophy” in R. Coyle (ed.) *Screen Scores. Studies in Contemporary Australian Screen Music*, AFTRS. Sydney. 1997, pp.50-1.

[4] Anahid Kassabian. *Hearing Film: Tracking Identification in Hollywood Film Musi*c, New York, Routledge, 2001, p. 66.

[5] Sam Oster, “Walkie talkie”, *Inside Film*, issue 80, Spetember 2005, p. 45.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Michael Fitzgerald. “Keeping time with Rolf de Heer”, *TIME Pacific*. 20 March 2006, http://www.time.com/time/pacific/magazine/article/0,13673,503060320-1172744,00.html Accessed 23 April 2006.

[8] ibid.

[9] ibid.

[10] Adrian Martin, “Wanted: Art Cinema,” *Cinema Papers*, December 2000, pp. 30-33.

[11] Cat Hope. “Hearing, the Story: Sound design in the films of Rolf de Heer”, *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 31, April/June 2004, http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/31/sound_design_rolf_de_heer.html Accessed 23 April 2006.